

Understanding leadership in higher education from a disability perspective

BELMAS

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Rationale

- exclusion of disabled people from labour market
- lack of disabled people in leadership positions in HE (and generally)
- greater attention so far paid to diversity of HE student population than of staff
- “widespread institutional discrimination against disabled staff” in the lifelong learning sector (Fullick 2008:1)



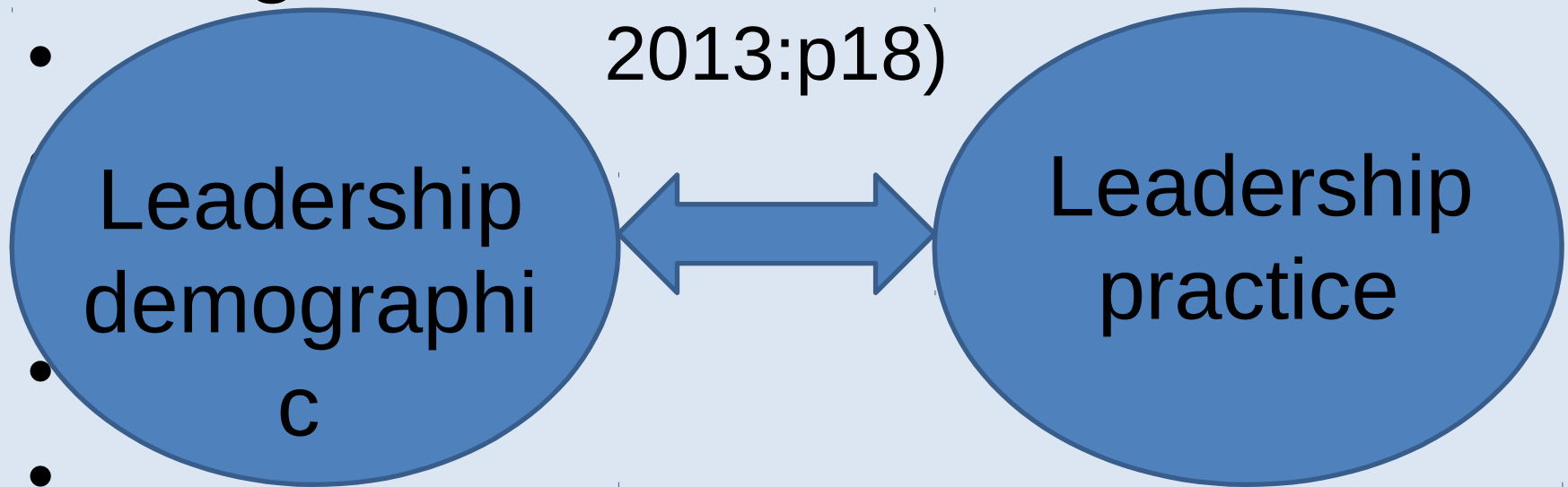
The aims of the study:

- to explore perceptions and experiences of leadership amongst disabled members of staff working at a UK university,
- to promote reflection on how to build leadership capacity among this under-represented group,
- and to stimulate policies at the university that aid current and future staff to be supported in the development of leadership skills.

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“the paradox of relying on leadership to deliver diversity when leaders tend

- to come from homogeneous
- backgrounds” (Bebbington and Özbilgin 2013:p18)
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Lack of diversity

Social model of disability



...views disability as a form of social oppression: a matter of human rights and equality, not of individual impairment.

Barriers arise from societal stereotypes: disabled people are seen as dependent, vulnerable , unable to make their own decisions....

Methodology

- Guided by emancipatory/participatory principles
- The challenge of access to community of disabled staff
- Involvement of the network of disabled staff



Design

- Online questionnaire
- Focus groups
- Interviews

Ethical issues:

- sensitivity of the topic
- reliance on sample of people who had already disclosed their disability
- role of expert advisor



Findings RQ1: How do disabled members of staff perceive leadership?

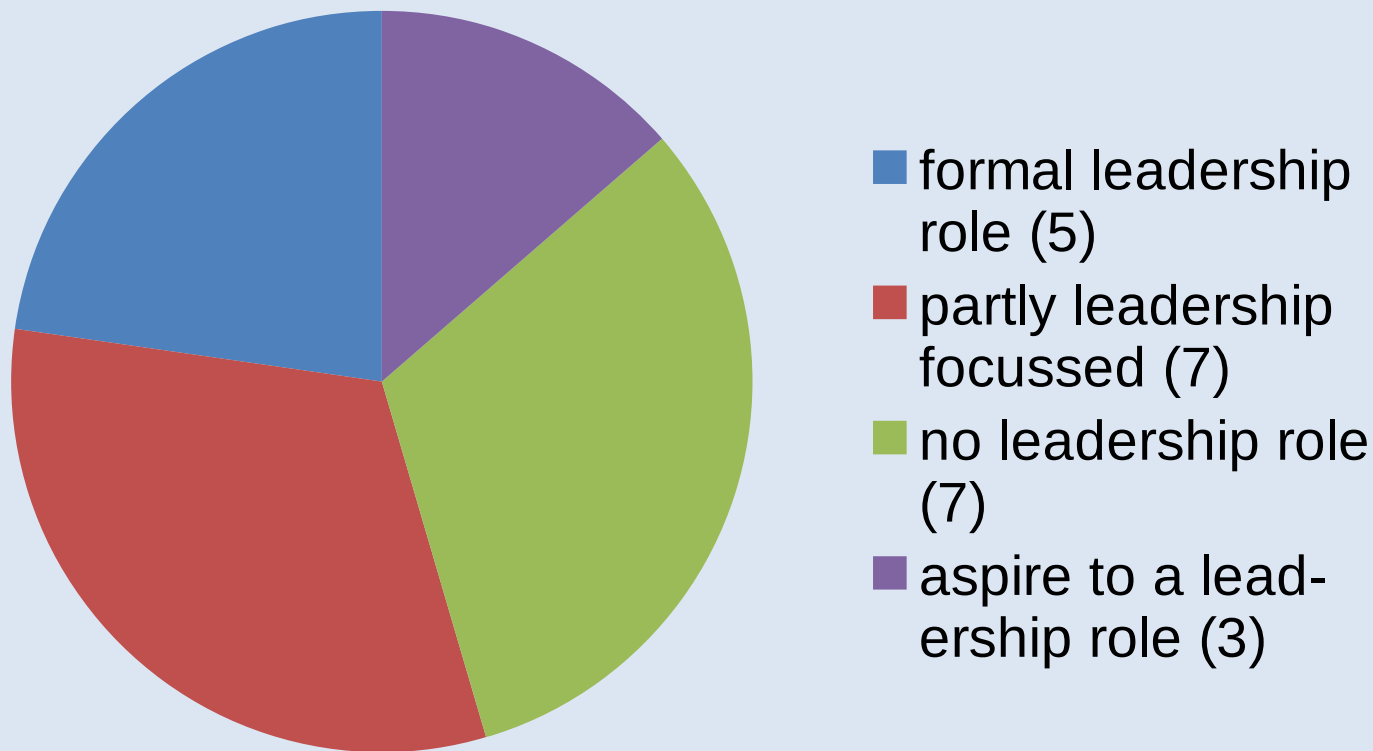
- disabled members of staff make as good, if not better, leaders
- leadership as a natural part of career development



- institutional expectations or sacrifice

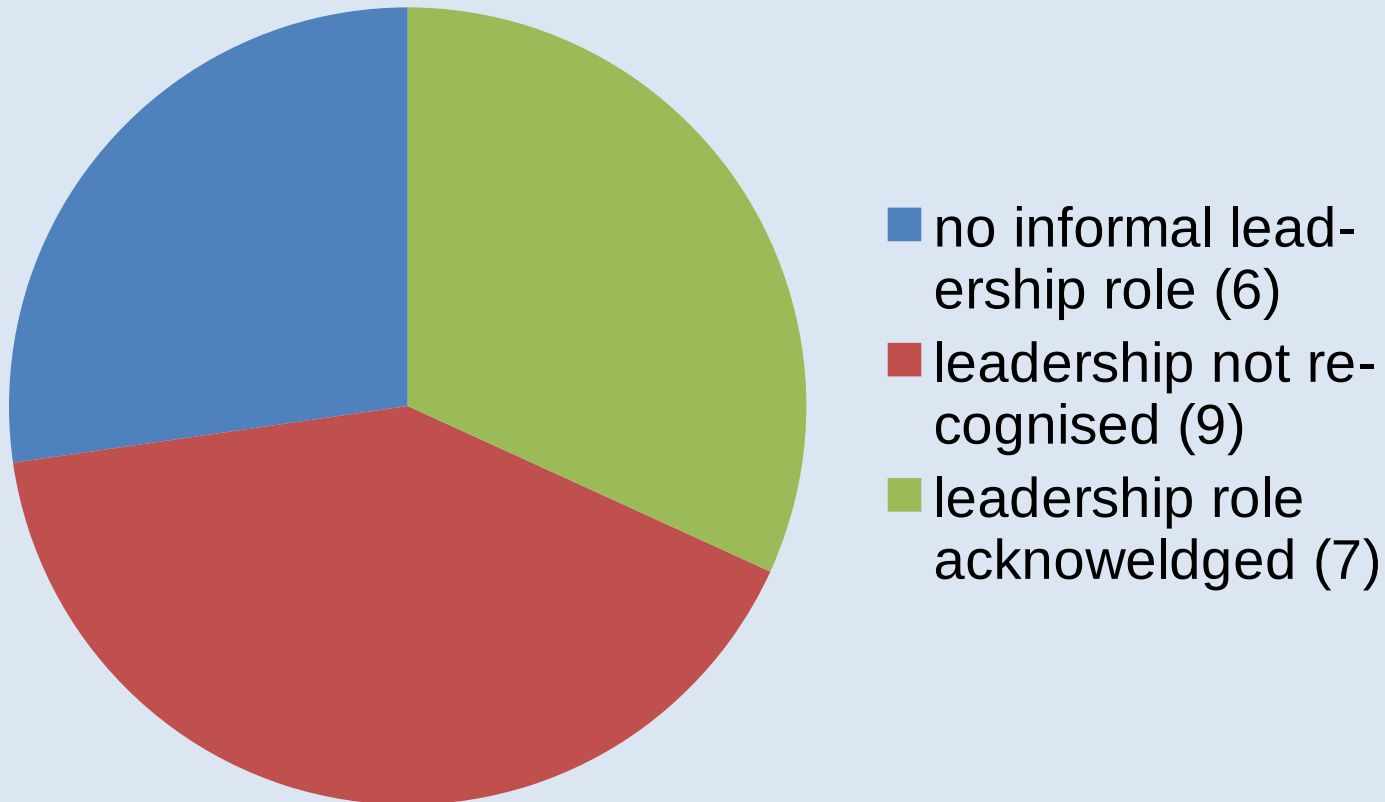
RQ2: Do they consider themselves to be leaders? (Formal)

of 22 questionnaire respondents



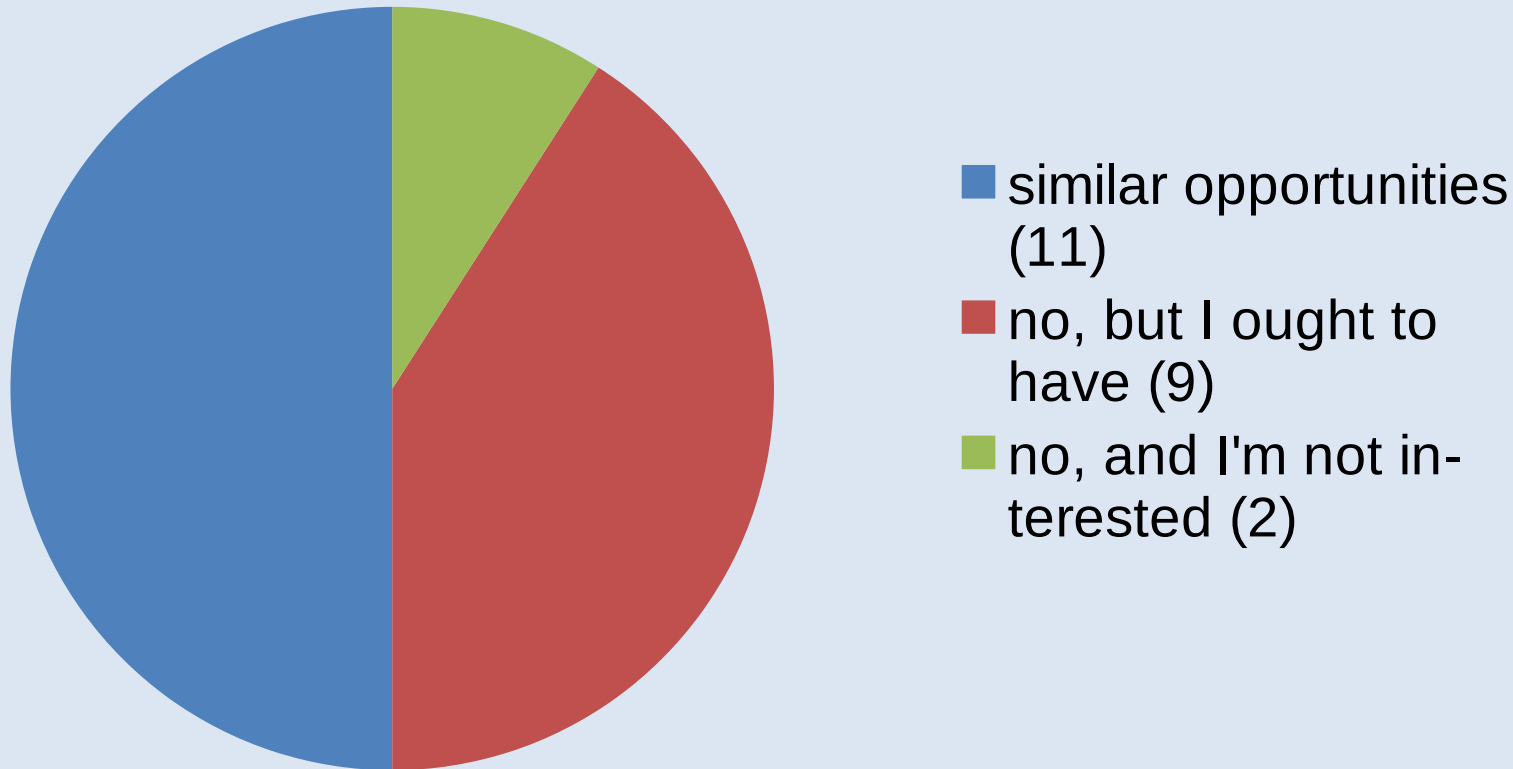
RQ2: Do they consider themselves to be leaders? (Informal)

Of 22 questionnaire respondents



Opportunities for attaining leadership roles compared to non-disabled colleagues

Of 22 questionnaire respondents



RQ3: What are the challenges that might prevent them from taking on a leadership role?

- Personal factors, including nature of impairment
- Institutional leadership culture
- Attitudes towards disability
- Lack of understanding/awareness
- Lack of investment in staff development



RQ4: How could they be supported to overcome these challenges?

- Opportunities for staff development (including mentoring)
- Understanding and support from managers and colleagues
- Positively promoting disabled people as leadership role models
- Formal guidance/procedures for supporting progression of disabled staff.
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Key messages

- Leadership is seen as

extra
responsibilit
y

commitmen
t

additional
work

long
hours
culture

above
and
beyond

presenteeism

stress



Key messages

- negative stereotypical conceptions of disability
- the misconception that leadership and disability are mutually exclusive/incompatible
- The particular challenges presented by specific additional needs
- Inadequate opportunities and support to engage in leadership

Key messages

The need for culture change in relation to

- Leadership....to make it more compatible with the full inclusion of disabled staff in HE
- Disability... such that the disabling barriers are addressed.

....so that disabled people's unique contributions to the organisation are valued.

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1.

“Disabled people make more enlightened decisions, are more inclusive by nature, they ignore smaller things to allow bigger things to happen.”

2.

“I recently went for a promotion role and was not even shortlisted even though I had the qualifications. I did declare I had a disability”.

3.

*“I have encountered
embarrassment and humiliation
because I have needed support
but I always have to justify it,
which is not empowering”.*

4.

“I have to give 130% a day – the role demands it. When I get home I am literally good for nothing. It would be difficult to consider applying for a leadership role”.

5.

“I believe that the more senior you get the more disabling the environment can be”.

6.

“I think there is also often a lack of self-confidence amongst disabled staff – they ask themselves if they are up to the demands of a leadership role? Then there are also still attitudes amongst employers that ask the very same question.”

“If you feel confident in your own abilities then that will be visible to others and instil confidence in them”.